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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing prominence of programs and funding related to family literacy, a comprehensive review of the professional literature on the topic has yet to be published. The need for such a document is great, both from the point of view of researchers, policy decision makers and those new to the field. For this study, two primary indexes within the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE) and Current Indexes to Journals in Education (CIJE) were searched using the descriptor "family literacy." In all, 409 abstracts were read and reviewed and 135 primary articles were analyzed. The abstracts and papers sorted themselves easily into three main categories: research emphasis (19%), program descriptions (33%), and position papers (38%). Additionally, 10% of the files either did not open, or were found to be completely unrelated to the topic under study. Three primary findings result from the synthesis of article and abstracts within the area of research emphasis. They are: (1) that many of the studies in this area have addressed highly focused areas as opposed to broad ones; (2) that many of the studies focused on areas that have been well-documented in other disciplines; and (3) that few of the studies concentrated on program efficacy. Of the 73 articles and abstracts in this category, 35 were found to have a primary focus well-documented in other fields of literature. Review of this literature reveals therefore problems, strengths, and needs within the discipline. One of the most prominent problems is the absence of well-agreed-upon definitions within the field. Another problem is the extremely small percentage of publications examining family literacy initiatives from an academic research perspective. And a third and related problem is that academic researchers are choosing questions of narrow focus. (Contains 33 references.) (TB)

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Family Literacy: Research Synthesis

The term "family literacy" was coined by Denny Taylor (1983) in a scholarly publication in which she sought to detail the day-to-day literacy activities which took place within several focal families. Although she created the term she did not set forth a concise definition, and since then, the term has become associated with a broad set of concepts in the professional literature including: 1) interest in the ways literacy is used within families, 2) the study of the relationships between the use of literacy in families and children's academic achievement, and 3) the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs to facilitate the literacy development of family members (Darling & Paull, 1994; Morrow, Tracey & Maxwell, in press). In addition, the concept of family literacy has been used by the popular press as a catch-all phrase to depict the growing awareness of the powerful influence of the family on children's literacy development.

Despite the definition problems associated with the term family literacy, or perhaps in part because of the absence of restrictive terminology, the concept has received a tremendous amount of both popular and professional press, and the amount of attention it is receiving, from researchers, practitioners, and policy makers continues to increase yearly (Brizius & Foster, 1993). In 1988, President Regan signed Even Start, the first federally funded initiative devoted exclusively to family literacy, into law. Subsequently, the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, spearheaded by Barbara Bush herself, was largely responsible for making the concept of family literacy a household word. Since 1988, federal funds of $70 million dollars have helped to fund hundreds of family literacy programs across the United States (Brizius & Foster, 1993). Additionally, hundreds of other family literacy projects exist which are not federally funded. Many of the latter were designed, and the teachers trained by, the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), the largest non-profit agency devoted to family literacy in the country. The National Center for Family Literacy, which now estimates that there are over 1000 family literacy programs in existence in the United States, aims to provide family literacy opportunities for at least one million Americans by the year 2000 (Brizius & Foster, 1993). The organization claims that family literacy initiatives are a solution to "how the intergenerational cycles of undereducation and poverty may be broken " (NCFL, 1994a, p.1). Judging by responses of our political leaders, many agree with them. In

example. President Clinton recently named November 1st "National Family Literacy Day" (NCFL, 1994c).

Despite the growing prominence of programs and funding related to family literacy, a comprehensive review of the professional literature on the topic has yet to be published. The needs for such a document are many. First, a review of the literature is needed by family literacy researchers so they can be aware of how their own specific lines of investigation relate to others within the broad context of the field. Similarly, such a review allow students, as well as those new to the discipline, an overview of the topic, as well as an understanding of those aspects of the field which are well developed, and those which are less well understood. Finally, there are practical applications, as those who are involved with program development and policy making can make better decisions, and hopefully create superior initiatives, if they are well informed on the professional literature. The present work, a review and synthesis of the literature on family literacy, sought to meet these needs.

Method

The two primary indexes of published works within the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE) and Current Indexes to Journals in Education (CIJE) were searched using the descriptor "family literacy". The Resources in Education index yielded 327 references and abstracts with the descriptor family literacy, and the Current Index to Journals in Education yielded 82 references and abstracts*. Each of the abstracts was read, notes were taken on cards, and then the cards were sorted into categories based on the primary focus of each abstract. Following categorization of the abstracts, a selection of articles from each category was read. The articles chosen to be read were selected to be representative of the articles in the group. Additionally, articles judged to be those most important to the field of family literacy, based on source of publication, author reputation, and article content, were read. Thus, in addition to the 409 abstracts which were read and reviewed, approximately one third (135) of the primary articles were analyzed. Following completion of all the reading and note taking, percentages of articles on each sub-topic were calculated, and the main ideas of the abstracts and articles within each category were synthesized.

Definitions Due to the problems of definition within the field of family literacy described above and cited elsewhere (Darling & Paull, 1994; Morrow & Paratore, 1993; Nickse & Quezada, 1994), the following clarifications were created and used for the purposes of this review.

Family Literacy- The study of the relationships between families and the development of literacy.

Family Literacy Programs- Programs which recognize the influences of the family on the literacy development of family members, and try to have a positive effect on those families.

Intergenerational Programs- Programs in which direct literacy instruction is given to more than one generation of family members (e.g. a mother receives literacy instruction and her child receives literacy instruction, including exposure to high quality early literacy experiences).

Parent Involvement Programs- Programs which attempt to work with parents in an effort to positively influence the parents' ability to support their own child's literacy development.

Importantly, it must be noted that according to these definitions, and according to the definitions set forth by the International Reading Association's Family Literacy Commission (Morrow & Paratore, 1993), neither traditional adult education programs, which primarily serve the needs of adult learners, nor traditional early childhood education programs, which primarily serve the needs of young children, qualify as falling within the domain of family literacy.

Results

Frequency Findings

The abstracts and articles read sorted easily into three main categories: 1) Research Emphasis (19% of the articles), 2) Program Descriptions (33% of the articles),and 3) Position Papers (38% of the articles). Additionally, 10% of the files either did not open, or were found to be completely unrelated to the topic under study. Articles and abstracts in the Research Emphasis category were those in which the authors of the abstracts or articles had themselves, framed their work in the context of research. These authors used the traditional language of academia in describing their work such as: *purpose of the study, sample, method and results*. Articles and abstracts comprising the Program Descriptions category were those whose primary focus was to describe and disseminate information regarding one or more family

literacy initiatives. Published curriculum guides were also included in this category. The category of Position Papers included all the cited works on family literacy which were neither Research Emphasis nor Program Descriptions.

Synthesis Findings

Research Emphasis. Three prominent findings resulted from the synthesis of the articles and abstracts within the area of Research Emphasis, that is, articles in which the authors had framed their work within the traditional context of academia. First, many of the research studies undertaken in the field of family literacy have addressed very specific, rather than broad, research questions. In example, titles of studies in the Research Emphasis category included "African-American Women Who Persist in Literacy Programs: An Exploratory Study" (Fitzsimmons, 1991), "Pediatric Interventions to Promote Picture Book Use" (Needleman, 1993) , and "Family Literacy in Early 18th Century Boston: Cotton Mather and his Children (Monaghan, 1991). Of the 73 articles and abstracts included in this category, 24 of them (33%) were judged by this writer to be narrow in focus.

The second prominent finding within the Research Emphasis category was that many of the reported studies focused on areas of investigation which have been already well documented in other bodies of professional literature. In example, studies of the relationship between children's oral language and literacy development (Thomas & Rinehart, 1990), children's early literacy home experiences and subsequent reading ability (Scarborough, 1991), and parental involvement and the development of children's emergent literacy skills (Hildebrand & Bader, 1992) have all been documented in the field of emergent literacy (Morrow, 1993). Of the 73 articles and abstracts in this category, 35 of the articles (48%) were judged by this writer as having a primary focus which has been well documented in other fields of literature. These most often included articles on the topic of emergent literacy, however, several articles on adult literacy and English as a second language were included as well.

The third prominent finding within the Research Emphasis category was that few of the studies focused on program efficacy. Of the 73 articles and abstracts in this category, only 18 of them (25%) focused on the effectiveness of family literacy programs. Put another way, of the 409 articles and abstracts in the ERIC database on the topic of family literacy, only 18 of them (4%) examined family

literacy programs from a research perspective. Three particularly high quality studies, described below, were the large-scale evaluation of the Even Start Program completed by St. Pierre, Swartz., Murray, Deck, & Nickel (1993), the non-conventional analysis of the effects of a family literacy project completed by Paratore, (1993), and the controlled study of the effects of a family literacy program done by Mikulecky & Lloyd, (NCFL, 1994c).

St. Pierre et al. have completed the most comprehensive family literacy evaluation thus far undertaken in this country, the evaluation of the federally funded Even Start Program. Using an experimental design as well as qualitative research methods, Even Start's three core programs were evaluated: parenting education, early childhood education, and adult literacy education. Although the results of the evaluation are too complex to adequately review here (interested readers are urged to read the original report) two of the main findings were that while Even Start has been extremely effective in its ability to deliver services to the target population, its effect on the measures assessed has been mixed. For example, significant differences favoring the experimental group were found between the Even Start children and the control children on the Preschool Inventory, but not on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Similarly, Even Start parents were significantly more likely than controls to obtain a Graduate Equivalency Degree, however, no measurable program effects were detectable on a survey evaluating reading and writing activities in the home. With regard to parenting abilities, significant improvement for the Even Start parents versus controls was found in the area of providing reading materials in the home, but not for frequency of depressive symptoms, measurement of locus of control, and performance on a parent-child reading task.

Paratore's (1993) work examined the effects of a family literacy program on the at-home literacy behaviors of a group of primarily Latino, immigrant families. Her work demonstrated far improved attendance rates and far decreased attrition rates for the family program participants in contrast to well documented rates in traditional adult education programs. Additionally, she reported that the parents in the program easily learned techniques for sharing books with their children, and that the adults reported routinely implementing the strategies at home. Other findings included that while the parents easily assimilated shared book reading into their parent-child interactions at home, the same was not true of

shared writing activities, and that the program parents were also slow in their willingness to begin to use the community public library.

Mikulecky and Lloyd (NCFL, 1994b) completed pre- and post interviews with adults following participation in an intergenerational family literacy program. Among other findings, they reported that after completing approximately five months in the program, the frequency of parent-child shared book reading increased by 70%, parents took their children to the library twice as often, and children's frequency of free reading increased by 80%.

Program Descriptions.

In contrast to the literature in which authors presented their work with a research emphasis, 33% of the articles in the family literacy database were program descriptions. Within this group, 18% of the abstracts and articles focused on describing intergenerational programs, those being programs which are designed to develop the literacy skills of more than one generation of family members. Many of the intergenerational programs described used the Kenan Model, which is the family literacy program model advocated by the National Center for Family Literacy. The typical objectives of intergenerational programs cited were to assist adults in raising their educational and reading levels, to assist adults in developing their parenting skills, to provide positive educational environments for at-risk children, and to facilitate children's literacy development. The Kenan Model programs also sought to strengthen adults' employability skills. The programs typically evaluated their success with measures of student attendance and attrition, the use of pre- and post self-report questionnaires, percentages of program participants able to earn graduate equivalency degrees, and varying measures of academic performance for both adults and children. Another measure often used to assess the children's growth was reports given by classroom teachers. The intergenerational program descriptions contained extremely positive reports of improvements in their participants' attitudes and abilities.

The largest percentage of the abstracts and articles in the Program Description Category described parent involvement programs (30%). As stated earlier, parental programs are ones in which attempts are made to strengthen parents' skills in fostering their children's literacy development. By definition, parent involvement programs were less comprehensive than intergenerational programs, and

less expensive to implement and administer. The focus of many of these programs was often related to book sharing; they increased parent's access to books, modeled high quality book sharing strategies, and taught techniques for storybook reading to parents of at-risk youngsters. If project evaluations were included in the program description, such factors as the frequency of parents reading aloud to their children, the frequency of adult modeling behaviors, and increased awareness, on the part of the adult, regarding the importance of reading aloud to children were reported. Again, as with the descriptions of the intergenerational programs, the authors of the program descriptions wrote overwhelmingly positive reports of their program and, if included, the effects on their participants.

Another percentage (14%) of the abstracts and articles in the Program Description category sought to disseminate information about family literacy initiatives at state and national levels. The following states within the U.S. reported initiatives, either in progress or under planning, related to family literacy: Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Initiatives reported outside of the United States were those of British Columbia, Saskatuan, and Thailand. The reports of state and national level initiatives frequently documented different family literacy program models available within the state, curriculum development ideas, criteria for program evaluation, recommendations for program effectiveness, and resources for related information.

Other articles and abstracts which fell into the Program Description category were those which described more than one type of family literacy program (5%), for example, The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy publication, *First Teachers* (1989) which describes 10 model family literacy programs in the United States. This book, and publications similar to it, were annotated bibliographies which reported the title, location, description, and contact information regarding many family literacy programs. Other articles in the Program Description category were devoted to family literacy programs for incarcerated individuals (2%) and family literacy initiatives which are libr y based (2%).

Importantly, of the 134 articles and abstracts in the Program Description category, 20% did not meet the criteria described in this paper, or elsewhere (Morrow & Paratore, 1993), to qualify as a family literacy project. Specifically, these programs were traditional adult education programs or traditional

adult ESL education programs which focused solely on the development of the adult learners' literacy abilities.

Position Papers.

Articles and abstracts in the Position Papers category were those in the family literacy database which were neither of a research emphasis, nor sought to disseminate information about particular family literacy projects. These articles were primarily essays related to various issues within the family literacy context. Of the 409 articles in the family literacy database, 38% fell into the Position Paper category.

The largest sub category of position papers related to the concept of parent involvement (22%). These articles and abstracts were primarily composed of ideas for parents to help their children become stronger, or more motivated students, including ideas to support reading, writing, math, study, and homework habits. Similarly, many of the documents offered ideas for teachers to work with parents in strengthening the "parent-as-teacher" concept of parent involvement. Representative of this type of work would be *The Curious Learner: Help Your Child Develop Academic and Creative Skills* (Simic, 1992). As with other citations of this nature, the content of these articles and abstracts was very similar to work and discussions often found outside the field of family literacy. In contrast to the relatively large number of papers which were devoted to the subject of parental involvement, only 3 position papers discussed the topic of intergenerational literacy. These papers focused on issues related to the Kenan Model of family literacy, as described by the National Center for Family Literacy.

Thirty-two articles and abstracts, or 20% of the category of position papers focused on the subject of family literacy in general. As defined earlier, these papers presented ideas documenting some aspect or aspects of the relationships between families and the development of literacy. These papers were more diverse than either the parental involvement or intergenerational articles, and documented such issues as: frameworks for classifying family literacy initiatives (Nickse, 1993), bibliographies of books related to family functioning and family literacy (Ahuna-Ka'Ai, 1993), testaments to the importance of family literacy initiatives (Smith, 1991), and the relationship between national literacy and the development of family literacy programs (The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, 1989).

Papers discussing the issue of the *deficit model* within family literacy were also included in the sub-section of the Position Papers category. The deficit model places "the locus of responsibility for literacy problems with the family" (Auerbach, 1989, p.169). Writers who petition against the deficit model (Auerbach, 1989; Taylor, 1993) "argue that it is the lack of social, political, and economic support for parents(in dealing with society) that puts their children at risk", rather than parents' lack of support for their children's literacy development (Auerbach, 1989, p.175). The implications of the deficit model for program development have been a source of heated debate in the field of family literacy (Taylor, 1994). Shanahan (1994) has extended the concerns voiced by deficit model critics by questioning educators' moral right to instill white, middle-class values and patterns of interaction in families from culturally and ethnically diverse communities.

The broadest sub-section of abstracts and articles in the Position Papers category were those which discussed literacy development, in general. Thirteen percent of position papers fell in this sub-section. Similar to the papers on the subject of family literacy, these documents were also diverse in nature. Most notably, the citations included references to books devoted to literacy development (Dickinson, 1994; Morrow, 1993), edited yearbooks related to the general topic of literacy development (Leu & Kinzer, 1993), and reports of conference proceedings. The majority of citations in this area included publications of many chapters which explored diverse aspects related to literacy development. The topic of family literacy was a peripheral, rather than central, element of focus in these works.

A small number of documents in the Position Papers category explored the role of libraries in family literacy (9%). Although the terminology *family literacy programs* was used throughout these abstracts and articles, it is important to note that the ideas expressed were consistent with the development of parent involvement, rather than intergenerational, programs. Several of these papers noted the suitability of libraries, rather than schools, as potential locations for family literacy programs. (Szudy & Byrnes, 1990; Stiles, 1991). Additionally, the issues of funding programs, and concerns regarding actual project implementation were reported.

A small number of citations in the Position Papers category focused specifically on evaluation issues pertinent to family literacy initiatives (4%). For example, Nickse (1993) has put forth a framework

for the evaluation of family literacy programs based on the work of Jacobs (1988). The framework presents five developmental levels of program evaluation, each more detailed and complex than the previous one. Another paper discussed the use of alternative evaluations in family literacy initiatives and argued that assessments such as surveys, interviews, observation, and performance samples were superior to traditional measures for documenting the literacy growth of family literacy participants (Holt, 1992). The issue of evaluation of family literacy programs has been a concern of both practitioners and researchers (Nickse, 1993).

A small group of abstracts and articles within the Position Papers category (11%) contained works that didn't fit within the other sub-topics, however, neither were there enough papers of similar focus to create a new sub-topic. Assorted works in this group included topics such as: the effects of U.S. national policies on individual lives (McKay & Weinstein-Shr, 1993), articles on workplace literacy (Mikulecky, 1993), and papers on literacy development specific to women.

Finally, another 29 articles and abstracts , 18% of the citations in this category, focused on the topics of adult literacy and ESL programs for adult learners. As stated earlier, by definition, these papers do not fit within the parameters of family literacy.

Discussion

Review of the literature on the topic of family literacy reveals problems, strengths, and needs within the discipline. One of the most prominent problems is the absence of well agreed upon definitions within the field. This issue hinders research efforts by making program comparisons difficult, and literature searches complicated. For example, in the present review a significant percentage of the abstracts and articles(20% of the Program Descriptions and 18% of the Position Papers) focused on adult literacy initiatives and issues, which, by current definition should not have been included in the family literacy database. Similarly, the absence of concise definitions has allowed a large percentage (48% of the Research Emphasis articles.) of the documents to focus on issues and research questions which are the primary focus of other literature bases. Most notably, many of the articles and abstracts focused on topics central to the study of emergent literacy. While some overlap with other bodies of research is to be expected, a strong need exists for the creation of family literacy publications which do not duplicate

findings from other bodies of literature. To move the study of family literacy forward, well agreed upon definitions must begin to be applied consistently throughout the field. Suggestions for such definitions have been provided within this paper.

A second salient problem within the family literacy literature is the extremely small percentage of publications which examines family literacy initiatives from an academic research perspective. Specifically, as reported, of the 409 articles and abstracts on family literacy reviewed, only 18 authors (4%) examined the efficacy of family literacy programs using traditional research parameters. The absence of high quality research investigations of family literacy initiatives hinders progress of the field by providing interested researchers with little guidance in designing studies, and puts program developers and policy makers at disadvantage for practical decision making. The present review of the literature suggests that there is a great need for high quality research examinations of the efficacy of family literacy interventions.

A third, and related, problem within the literature is that academic researchers are choosing questions of narrow focus, as well as questions which are deeply rooted in other literature bases as described above, as the focus of their research investigations. As reported earlier, of the 73 articles which were written from a research perspective, 33% of them were judged by this writer to be narrow in focus, that is, addressing issues of very specific rather than broad interest.

Finally, the published literature on family literacy suffers from what I consider to be pervasive, however, largely unsupported, optimism regarding family literacy interventions. While there is clearly an extensive and high quality body of research which documents the effects of the family on children's literacy development, there is much less quality research on the effectiveness of our interventions. It is important that individuals interested in family literacy differentiate between the findings of high quality research efforts, of which there are few, and the pervasive optimism of program developers, of which there is much. While program practitioners are well intentioned in describing their efforts, they frequently have not examined their programs with the rigor associated with professional research.

Despite the problems inherent in the literature on family literacy, several strengths emerge. First, a well documented, consistent finding is that family literacy participants persist in family literacy

programs longer than they persist in traditional adult literacy projects (Paratore, 1993; St. Pierre et al., 1993). This finding is extremely important because of its implications for academic achievement: the longer adults participate in educational programs, the larger their academic gains are likely to be (Paratore, 1993).

Second, there is consistent research documentation that supports the finding that participation in family literacy programs positively affects parent-child at-home literacy interactions (NCFL, 1994c; Paratore, 1993). This findings is a critical link in the importance of family literacy initiatives, as the impact of parents-child interactions on children's developing literacy behaviors has been firmly established in studies of emergent literacy (Morrow, 1993).

The family literacy movement is well situated on a strong research base documenting the powerful influence of parents on children's literacy development. However, to move the field forward, researchers must now go forth and create similarly strong documentation of the effects of programmatic interventions. This research is most likely to grow from collaborative efforts between educational researchers who specialize in high quality research efforts, and educational practitioners who create and implement programs. Such efforts require that educational researchers adopt concise, agreed upon definitions, and begin to ask broader questions about family literacy, and questions which move beyond emergent literacy issues which are already well documented and form their own specialization of investigation. Collaborative efforts also require that practitioners be willing to open their programs to intervention and evaluation by academic researchers.

The field of family literacy is still in its infancy. Greater clarity, focus, and professional communication within the discipline are needed to move our understanding of programmatic efforts forward. It is hoped that this paper will contribute positively to these goals.

*This literature review was concluded in January, 1995. Additions to the ERIC system database are made monthly.

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